

# THE TWO MRS. BASSES

*Sid Bass's hometown never quite cottoned to uppity Anne, which may be why she settled for \$200 million on Fifth Avenue. So what kind of welcome is Mercedes receiving deep in the heart of Texas?*

BY MIMI SWARTZ



*Mercedes Bass mastered Fort Worth society.*

elegantly over her shoulders, made her an island of understatement in a sea of opulence. The same words were on the lips of every rubbernecker in the room: *That's her. That's Sid's little Mercedes.*

Before Texas's silent and not-so-silent leadership, Perry and Nancy Lee Bass, whose family name had never been blackened by the tragedy of divorce, whose family name was, in fact, synonymous with the word rectitude, officially embraced the dark-haired stranger their son had brought into their midst. It was time to lay the scandal that had begun over two years ago to rest. It was time to forget that Sid had scuttled his marriage of twenty-one years for a married New York socialite. It was time, even with Sid's divorce from the cool, blond Anne not quite final, to begin again. By allowing Kellogg, forty-four, to appear on Sid's arm at the reception—and there she was, drinking, smoking, and having a grand old time—Perry and Nancy Lee had issued a proclamation without saying a word. Maybe it was simply astonishing.

Maybe it was truly remarkable. But if Perry and Nancy Lee wanted this skinny-legged New York society divorcee as part of their family, well, by God, Texans everywhere would find a way to take her in, too.

Since the first spark of romance in the spring of 1986, high society has been captivated by the oh-so-contemporary love story of Sid Bass, arguably the world's cutest billionaire, and Mercedes Kellogg, arguably the world's shrewdest encore bride. He is, of course, the Yale-educated grand-nephew and namesake of wildcatter Sid Richardson, the third-generation scion who boosted the family fortunes by supplementing the family's oil riches with stock market plays. (His holdings in Disney alone were—predivorce—worth \$1.4 billion.) She is, of course, the Iranian-born socialite named after the family car, a star graduate of Oscar de la Renta's school of manners and mores, and the former wife of establishment New Yorker Francis Kellogg.

**T**HEIR HEROIC LOVE STORY has also been playing simultaneously on another, smaller stage: namely Fort Worth, Texas, the Bass family's home base. In New York, close to the action, socialites wore faces of giddy delectation. In Fort Worth, where people are closer to Sid's folks, society

## *Anne Bass never learned to pick her fights: she even tried to change the collars on the girls' uniforms at school*



*Sid Bass with Mom, Dad, and Lee. Once the family took Mercedes in, so did Texas.*

wore a face of deep concern. From tables at the Shady Oaks Country Club, debes and grande dames had watched as Anne Bass stormed her way up the New York social ladder. They were far from crushed when she lost her husband to charming dinner partner Mercedes at a fateful Black and White Ball in Blenheim Palace in June of 1986. In Westover Hills mansions, dinners grew cold while gossips chewed over the stories of Sid-and-Mercedes summer flirting matches in the Hamptons. There was the party where Mercedes pelted Sid with dinner rolls. And who could forget that drilling-equipment heiress Sao Schlumberger ratted on the lovebirds when she spied them in Paris?

In Fort Worth, as in New York, sympathies were shifting away from the abandoned

wife. Kellogg showed spirit; she was *fun*. Anne, on the other hand, was uppity, with her boarding-school barrettes and chilly East Coast airs. But most of all you heard the same lament on the lips of every socially ambitious Texas woman: "If only I'd known Sid was looking."

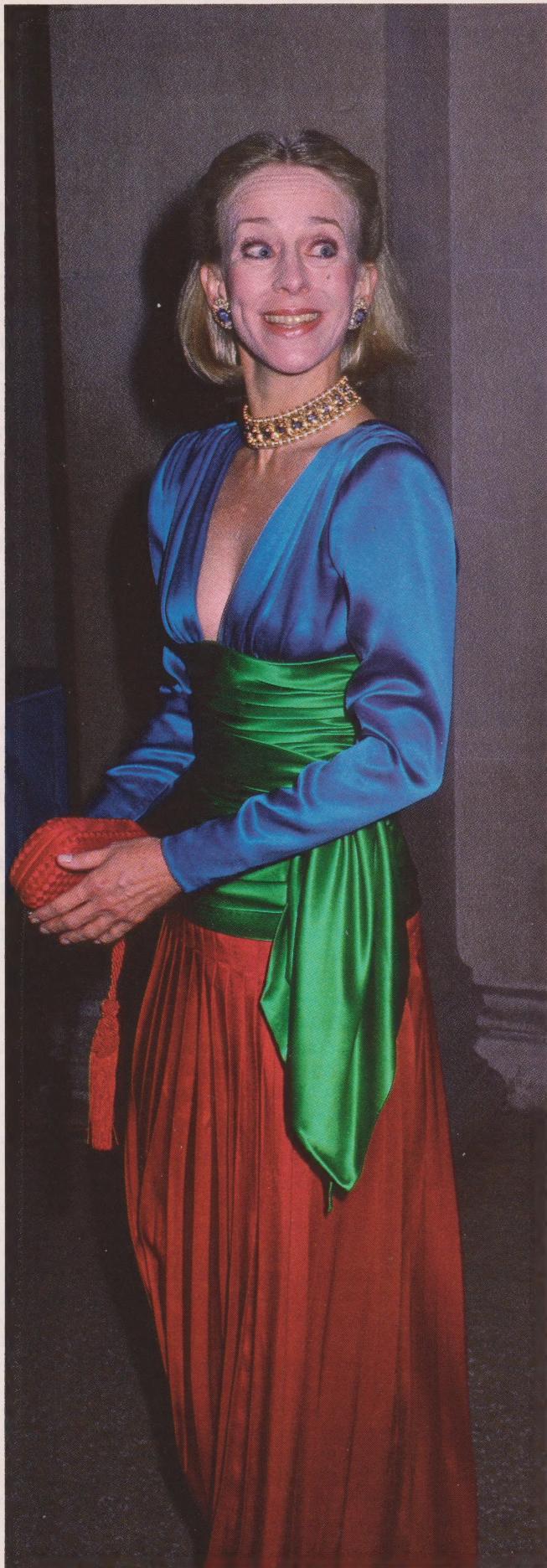
Now, as the saga of the two Mrs. Basses continues in the cold light of a \$200 million divorce settlement, the theme of this moneyed melodrama is changing. The first Mrs. Bass may have lost her husband, but she's still got Monets on the walls of her Fifth Avenue apartment, she's still on the board of the New York City Ballet, and she's one of W's Social Cyclones. She'll do just fine. Now it's the new Mrs. Bass's turn. No one believes she is going to keep hearth and home in Fort Worth as part of her marriage vows. But Anne's successor and sister Cyclone seems bent on proving herself in Sid's hometown.

How will a city slicker like Mercedes Kellogg play in the provinces? In a town where "down home" and "laid back" are the labels locals apply with pride? Where overdressing is grounds for expulsion? ("She wears Bulgari before five o'clock," was the way one local summed up another arriviste.) And where, as one Junior Leaguer hissed, "our millionaires go home to their wives"?

Fort Worth has its own carefully constructed social code—the rules are strictly



*Anne, overdressed, as usual.*



Anne Bass snubbed her husband's hometown.

**I**T WAS A PARTY THAT TEXAS'S FIRST FAMILIES HAD been anticipating for months: the dedication of the new three-thousand-seat Nancy Lee and Perry R. Bass Concert Hall at the University of Texas at Austin last October. Oldest and grandest Texas filled the plush auditorium seats to honor its own, that generous Fort Worth couple and the parents of those famous Bass boys, Sid, Ed, Robert, and Lee. The women wore diamonds that shimmered like the waters off the Gulf of Mexico. The men looked downright upright in their tuxedos, except, of course, for Governor Bill Clements, who declined to wear one. Lady Bird showed up to pay tribute, as did John and Nellie Connally, so good-humored you'd never know the troubles they'd seen. Van Cliburn, a Bass neighbor back home, even tickled the ivories. It was a historic night all right. It was a night, noted the *Dallas Morning News*, "full of surprises."

The low-profile, big-money crowd celebrated with prebust gusto. After all, these are the multimillionaires Texas loves to love: always tasteful, never trashy. Any-one present that evening would gladly tell you Perry and Nancy Lee Bass are just "the most down-to-earth people you will ever meet." "Simply astonishing," was the way university president William H. Cunningham described the couple—and their \$15 million contribution to the school. "Nothing short of remarkable," echoed chairman of the board of regents Jack S. Blanton. Throughout the evening, the elder Basses, their narrow eyes twinkling, their toothy twin grins a testament to a loving partnership that had lasted almost fifty years, accepted the accolades graciously.

But it was with something more than good grace that Perry and Nancy Lee welcomed the tiny woman with the I-adore-you eyes locked perpetually on their forty-seven-year-old son, Sid. You couldn't miss Mercedes Kellogg that night: her dark hair seemed swept off her face just to give her dazzling smile an even wider berth. Her short lime green sheath, its matching cashmere shawl draped

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Happily ever after? Mercedes won her man and her millions, but how many rodeo parades can an uptown girl take?

enforced and hopelessly contradictory. Pedigrees matter more than money, old Fort Worth will tell you; fun is valued more than fortune. But occasionally, their whoop-it-up side can come into serious conflict with their image of themselves as bearers of the highest moral standards. Susan Gutfreund—then Kaposta—was given a rough time in town during the late seventies when, after the husband she'd landed in Palm Beach brought her back home and shortly and unceremoniously filed for divorce, she became a persona non grata. While the local men were charmed, the women cut her dead. New York, it must be said, was kinder.

Nowhere does this small-town righteousness come into play more sharply than with the Bass family. No family is more prominent, and no family is more revered. Like Saudi princes, the Basses have shared their wealth with the community: Of six new skyscrapers, the two tallest belong to the Bass family. The revitalized downtown, the resuscitation of the arts, even the city's hippest night-club can be credited in large part to the Basses. In exchange for their largesse, the Basses have engendered enormous loyalty. Townspeople—not just members of society—are protective of them.

The collapse of Sid's first marriage is still referred to euphemistically as "when the whole thing happened." Even a librarian saw fit to defend the family honor

when asked for clips on Sid and Mercedes. "If it's about the wedding, we wouldn't have it," he said. "It didn't happen." Few, if any, sources close to the Basses will speak to the press, in deference to a long-standing family request. When the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* supplemented its wedding coverage with W's slightly snipey story ("The crowd ran the social gamut from A to B, with a preponderance of Bs"), old Fort Worth was seriously chapped. Of course, loyalty isn't the only reason Fort Worth keeps buttoned up about the Basses. Directly or indirectly, the family can affect almost any job in town. "The thinking is, I'm gonna miss out on a Bass deal if I talk," explains one Fort Worth native.

Still, such power inevitably incurs resentment, and a trickle of that has worked its way through Fort Worth's firmament. Part of the problem is there isn't much else to do. There are few local celebrities—tennis star Martina Navratilova is relocating, leaving pianist Van Cliburn the only bona fide international superstar. Partly by default, Bass watching has become the leading spectator sport, particularly as the family's penchant for privacy has increased. And for more than twenty years, the focus of this steely-eyed scrutiny was the Bass who ignored Fort Worth society's dictates most flagrantly: the former Anne Hendricks herself, who, Fort Worth natives are quick

to add, hails from Indiana, *not* Texas.

It's hard to pinpoint the wellspring of Anne's unpopularity. Some say the trouble started as early as 1970, the year Anne got the blame for hiring Paul Rudolph instead of a local architect to design the couple's Westover Hill's home. Later, people felt royally snubbed when Anne failed to mix at local soirees. Yes, she and Sid gave millions to the arts; yes, she established a local ballet company with dancers imported from the New York City Ballet. But inevitably, her attitudes brought a new level of social pressure to town. Such was Anne's sway, reported *Texas Monthly*, that when she shod her daughters in a particular pair of Mary Janes from a Madison Avenue shop, every envious Fort Worth mother traced her child's foot on a piece of paper and sent the pattern off for the shoes.

"Anne had a New York attitude," sniped one Junior Leaguer. "She didn't go native, she refused to accept native customs." Indeed, the first Mrs. Bass often left the impression that she would rather be in Manhattan. Everyone from bookstore clerks to decorators' assistants have Anne-Bass-snubbed-me stories. She was too prissy with her power. Two years ago, when artistic differences threatened her cherished Balanchine repertoire at the Fort Worth Ballet, Anne made it clear she would withdraw her patronage unless it was preserved. (It

was.) It never seemed to occur to Anne to pick her fights: she even tried to change the collars on the girls' uniforms at the private school the Bass family had been instrumental in founding. Consequently, when word of Sid's infidelity hit town, "it was dingdong the witch is dead," recalled a member of one old family with some satisfaction.

But Fort Worth didn't cotton to Mercedes immediately. In the two years spanning Sid's separation and second wedding day, Mercedes's reputation as a good-time geisha brought mixed reviews. Some of the middle-aged men in Sid's crowd, undone by stories of the couple acting kissy kissy on the family plane, were frankly surprised at his choice. "We thought he'd find someone twenty-five years old. Or thirty years old," commented one colleague. "Then we figured there must be some spunk to this girl. Then we figured, by Sid stepping up and marrying her, he really was in love with her. Whatever it was, he flipped for this girl."

One by one, Mercedes won them over. At a dinner party Armand Hammer threw at Claridges, she charmed one Fort Worth aristocrat by holding up her end of a conversation on Persian love poetry handily. When the man mentioned that he longed to hear the verses in their mother tongue, Mercedes swiftly obliged. "I'm sure she had beguiled many men at the dinner table," the gentleman says, still besotted.

Mercedes's thawing effect on her Bass-to-be became crystal clear at the December rehearsal dinner. The heretofore reserved Sid stood before the assembled and proclaimed, "I have a wonderful woman, and we're very much in love." Then, confessing that he "had never done this into a microphone before," he awkwardly uttered the word "Yahoo." The Texans in the crowd—who had never seen Sid act like a rough-neck before—were flummoxed.

Still, in the eyes of many Texans, the \$200 million-plus divorce not only underscored Sid's love for his bride to be but increased Mercedes's standing as well. "She finally arrives," says one observer who is close to the family. "Here is

## *Mercedes, said one observer, "is very much duchess of Windsor. Very much Glenn Close in Dangerous Liaisons"*



Sid's divorce hit Fort Worth like a summer storm. But it costs millions to rile a Bass.

this petite little woman. Very much duchess of Windsor with her hair in a twist. Very Glenn Close in *Dangerous Liaisons* in a short mink coat with no appreciable diamonds." "Let's face it," says one Dallas woman who spirited her husband out of Fort Worth. "That girl has to be pretty damn sharp. She's cost Sid some money."

MERCEDES HAS WISELY left any big-city airs back in Manhattan. Unlike Anne, Mercedes is nice to underlings. "I imagine it's a studied attribute," quips one family factotum. She headed not for the chicest hair salon but to one favored by the old guard. She gladly went to deb teas at the Rivercrest Country Club with Nancy Lee. At the rodeo last February, she sat properly dressed in the family box: "She had on cute, cute khakis," one society matron notes happily. "She looked darling. You could have peeled the grin off Sid's face." At a birthday party given for Sid at Joe T. Garcia's, the city's legendary Mexican restaurant, Mercedes bravely downed killer margaritas and an entire Family Plate: two cheese enchiladas, rice, beans, two tacos, guacamole salad, chips, tortillas, hot sauce, and two bean-and-cheese nachos. By winter's end, her just-folks efforts were rewarded with what was widely regarded as old Fort Worth's formal seal of approval: a black-tie dinner dance at the mansion of Anne

in the company of a *New York* decorator, David Easton.

Anne herself has made some small headway in recent months. Because her behavior during the divorce was exemplary, and because she did not throw over Fort Worth, public sentiment toward her has softened. She showed some spunk of her own when she arrived alone for the Cinderella ballet ball last fall, and club women were pleased and grateful when she offered her sprawling Russell Page gardens for the spring pilgrimage. Word circulated approvingly when she abandoned her hair clips and when handsome Manhattan art dealer Richard Feigen appeared as her date for a reception at the Kimbell. "People think she's humbled," notes one of Sid's crowd.

Once again, it seems the Bass family has enriched the local cultural scene. Opportunities for Sid-and-Mercedes watching seem to be on the upswing. Handicappers are now guesstimating which local social event will be the next to feature both Mrs. Basses. Daughter Hyatt's debut before the assembly later this year is the current favorite. "That should be interesting," one Bass Brothers associate says, trying to contain his anticipation. But most of all, folks in Fort Worth are pleased everything worked out. Sid got his girl, at least half his fortune, and a new lease on life. "And just think," quips one family friend. "He doesn't have to go to one more ballet." ■